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Reflections

Governing political spaces through "future work" – commentary to Jones

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This reflections article is a comment upon Rhys Jones' paper (in this issue) which deals with the geographies of the governance of the future. I suggest that the constant production of governmental imaginaries dealing with the future should be understood as "future work" that is an essential dimension of a broader phenomenon of "territory work" whereby processes of re-territorialization and de-territorialization come together. The active attempt to "know" and cope with the future should be understood as an essential constituent of all governing activities without which the rationality of governance would lose much of its meaning. Governance of the future, as it occurs in governmental practices and associated imaginaries that translate the future into a governable object, is an essential dimension in the ongoing remaking of territories of wealth, power and belonging. This process merits more geographical examination and commentary.

Keywords: governance, future work, political space, capitalism

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Introduction

As the enlightening paper by professor Rhys Jones (2019) underscores, the spatiality of the future is produced in the present in diverse practices of governance, steering, political economy and institutional arrangements. The study of the governance of the future is therefore too important to be left to Futures Studies, let alone to futurologists for whom the future is synonym to technological development or economic calculus.

In his book *Seeing like a State*, Scott (1998) suggest that the central dimension of the modern state is "legibility", which refers to the practices of rationalizing and standardization of state space into administratively convenient format. Arguably, these practices of making the state as an object of governance include diverse future-oriented practices such as urban and regional planning, economic forecasting, standardization of legal discourse, and the organization of transportation. If the premodern states were "blind" with regard to society and environment, the modern state is, in turn, constantly re-worked through detailed "maps" of its territory and population. In modern statecrafting, both society and the environment is refashioned by "state maps of legibility" (*ibid.*, 3) as particular simplifications that selectively produce knowledge on "society" and "environment" of a given state. This selectivity notwithstanding, state simplifications are powerful and transformative by nature, and

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thus play a key role in bringing about the future. In short, they enable "much of the reality they depicted to be remade" (*ibid.*, 3).

By following the logic of Scott, I suggest that the constant production of governmental imaginaries dealing with the future should be understood as "future work" that is an essential dimension of a broader phenomenon of "territory work" whereby processes of re-territorialization and de-territorialization come together (Moisio & Luukkonen 2017). This kind of future work takes place not only in the standing committees for the future that one finds in many national parliaments, for instance. Rather, the active attempt to "know" and cope with the future should be understood as an essential constituent of all governing activities without which the rationality of governance would lose much of its meaning.

Governance of the future, as it occurs in governmental practices and associated imaginaries that translate the future into a governable object, is an essential dimension in the ongoing remaking of territories of wealth, power and belonging. Cities, regions and states are constantly re-worked, transformed and maintained in and through future work, whereby diverse actors – politicians and political authorities operating at various scales, consultants, representatives of trade unions and business confederations, and academic scholars – articulate the challenges, threats, possibilities and hopes that a given political community is facing.

This essay proceeds in three sections. Section two discusses the geographical perspective to the analysis of the governance of the future outlined by Rhys Jones. In section three, I briefly discuss the role of future work in the context of knowledge-based economization that merits rigorous geographical investigation and commentary.

Geographies of the governance of the future

As Jones (2019) argues in his paper, human geography has much to offer for the study of the governance of the future. As a response to his own call, Jones develops a multi-layered geographical perspective to the spatial study of the governance of the future. By using the concept of "geographies", he seeks to spatialize the analysis of the governance of the future. Accordingly, geographers may elaborate how the "governance of the future occurs differently in different places and emerges as a result of a movement of people, things and ideas from one location to another" (Jones 2019, 9). This perspective explicitly connects the study of the governance of the future to the literature of policy transfer and policy mobility. These are fields of scholarship on which geographers have already made significant contributions (for an overview, see e.g. Temenos & McCann 2013). Second, Jones highlights what can be called the geographical variegation of the governance of the future; the ways in which governance of the future "becomes embedded" in various ways in different states, nations and regions. Third, Jones suggest that the scalar dynamics of the governance of the future merit more scholarly explication.

Importantly, Jones adds a normative component to the geographical study of the governance of the future. He suggests that a focus on the geographical dimensions on the governance of the future potentially enables one to imagine and promote "a more hopeful and just version of the future" (*ibid.*, 8). Even if this idea is not fully developed in his paper, Jones proposes that a spatial interrogation of the geographies of the governance of the future has the potential to impact on the definition and promotion of spatial justice. This is a bold argument that seeks to bring geographical analysis closer to political practice: to the ways in which spatial justice is actually defined and practiced in political strategies, as well as enacted by policy-makers and civil servants at various scales.

Jones elaborates his arguments through a vivid examination of the development and implementation of Wales' *Well-being of Future Generations Act* (hereafter, Well-being Act). The Well-being Act is actually an interesting part of the executive devolution of power that Wales experienced in 1999. In this capacity, the goal was to define Welsh models of policy delivery, whether in relation to education, health or sustainable development, and to consider the impact of present policies on future generations in Wales.

The Well-being Act articulates a goal to create a better and more just Wales by the year 2050. It is supposed to create a prosperous, resilient, healthy, and more equal Wales that would be

characterized by cohesive communities, global responsibility, as well as thriving Welsh language and culture by 2050. For Jones, the Well-being Act seems to signal a positive and inclusive attempt of the Welsh Government to achieve spatial justice in the future. Tailoring this vision was not only based on a relatively democratic process of consultation, but it also included new ways of approaching justice and well-being.

In his article, Jones (2019) puts together a three-tier scalar analysis of the Well-being Act. He first scrutinizes the way in which the Well-being Act is embedded in a national Welsh scale, and points out that the homogenizing emphasis on the nation has some potentially negative repercussions for the realization of spatial justice in a spatially diversified Wales. While perceiving the local operationalization of the Well-being Act as potentially enriching from the perspective of spatial justice, Jones ends up making a set of equally critical observations dealing with the local operationalization and reasoning of the programme.

The third scale Jones elaborates in his paper is the most enlightening to me. It introduces the mind of a civil servant as a pivotal terrain of governance and highlights the embodied ways of working on the Well-being Act. Interestingly, the Well-being Act has been accompanied by notable efforts on behalf of various political authorities and organizations to encourage public servants to analyse the long-term impact of their initiatives and decisions. Public servants are therefore encouraged to ask themselves what they are actually doing. By echoing the era of spatial Keynesianism, "slow" and "rational" working in policy-making is encouraged in the context of the Well-being Act, especially if that kind of orientation leads to action that takes into consideration the long-term implications of policy-making. The emphasis on behavioural change related to thinking and acting differently is most interesting in the contemporary historical conjuncture that is characterised by increasing pressure towards the public sector to develop fast policies, to deliver effectively, and to create impressive economic outcomes as effectively as possible. At least implicitly, the Well-being Act hence seeks to release the civil servant from the trap of the electoral cycle, which inescapably underscores the need for short-term gains. In this capacity, the Well-being Act at least potentially swims against the processes of neoliberalization. It may hence be an interesting example of an alternative policy process that political authorities operating in different geographical contexts may well like to study in more detail.

It is, of course, an entirely different thing to speculate how the future work such as the Well-being Act actually contributes to the well-being in Wales, and how it is related to the broader political-economic developments in Wales and beyond, including the distribution of both public and private assets. The paper by Jones (2019) however succinctly discloses the fact that the Well-being Act is already more than a paper tiger. Moreover, his article is successful in demonstrating that the making of the future as an object of governance has at least three geographical dimensions that merit scholarly attention:

1. It is a geographical process in itself. In other words, all ideas regarding the future are historically contingent, spatially rooted (contextual) and connected to broader transnational webs of ideas and processes.
2. Geographical spaces are under re-making in the present in the practices of governance that focus on the future.
3. Geographical inquiry into the governance of the future may contribute to the tailoring of policies and discourses that enhance the construction of more spatially just political communities. This would also require developing methods and data that do not foreclose the future but rather open it up to debate that motivates creative and bold imagining of alternative futures of hope.

Coda: future work in the context of knowledge-based economization

Future work can be understood as inescapably selective and political way of knowing and framing the future and, thus, guiding societal change. With regard to actorness, a distinction can be made between four forms of future work. The first of these manifests itself in various future programmes and future roadmaps, which are launched by political authorities and tailored through official procedures. The Well-being Act discussed by Jones (2019) falls into this category.

The second form of future work covers the whole spectrum of mundane governance and steering practices, which are premised on particular widely shared views of "preferred" futures. Today, this mundane governance work recycles the basic vocabularies of post-Fordist capitalism, combined with the various discourses of sustainable development. The everyday governance and steering work of the state is related to the fourth form of future work: that made by consultant companies. In this context, future appears almost invariably through the notion of harsh inter-spatial economic competition: future is conceived as a threat or as a challenge that needs to be governed and managed through particular expertise. This kind of future work operates through all manner of predictions and scenarios dealing with societal developments. Governing challenging futures through precaution, preparedness and forecasting has therefore become a lucrative business, and the analyses by consultancies are widely utilized by state administrations in different geographical contexts.

The fourth form of future work manifests itself in the world of academic scholarship. Indeed, the sheer societal power of conceptual frames and key ideas developed by guru scholars in the field of urban studies or business management, for instance, is at least partly based on their tendency to portray not only how the world is, but also how it should be. Popular academic theories that touch upon issues such as societal change, competitiveness and urbanization thus have a particular role in future work. These theories are not only descriptive but also prescriptive, and they hence embody a form of productive power regarding the future.

It seems clear that the contemporary production of the state as a territory of wealth, power and belonging under capitalist globalization touches upon both state spatiality and population and brings together many forms of future work outlined above. In its various attempts to "respond" to the perceived inevitable futures of capitalism, the state has actively brought about the different forms of post-Fordist regimes of capitalist accumulation since the late 1980s. I have conceptualized this process as knowledge-based economization (Moisio 2018a). One topic that merits more geographical scholarship is exactly the statist and political production of the imagined economic forms of the future. Human geographical analysis on the ways in which the contemporary knowledge-intensive form of capitalism is constituted through active re-working of political spaces and populace might increase understanding on how the discursive envisioning of the future, when combined with state power, actually contributes to the generation of new economic forms such as the "start-up economy".

The imaginaries of knowledge-intensive form of capitalism are extremely future-oriented and "positive" in their representational qualities. This is why Jessop (2004) connects the knowledge-based economy with what he calls a new economic imaginary which has performative and constitutive force. The imaginaries of the knowledge-intensive form of capitalism have become so strong that, within the OECD-sphere in particular, the political parties from right to left seem to be touchingly unanimous on one thing: that the bright future of their political communities is dependent on the capacity to cope with the "rules" of the global knowledge-intensive capitalism. These geographical contexts are therefore increasingly characterized by future work that envisions entire cities and states as nests of innovation, agglomeration, talent, particular skills, creativity, entrepreneurship, and start-ups, to name but a few. It is, for instance, interesting to notice that the increasingly powerful narrative on the shift of the political community called Finland "from technology to content" gives rise to new city- and metropolis-centered spatial imaginaries of the state (Moisio 2018b). It is equally notable how such future work draws from popular academic theories dealing with urban agglomeration economies, for instance.

The process of knowledge-based economization has involved imagining the "useful" capacities and orientations of national populace, as well as the new spatial forms of the state that may contribute to state's international competitiveness. It is for this reason why the process of knowledge-based economization is challenging also from the perspective of spatial justice. There is a danger that emphasising a set of national priorities in relation to economic competitiveness lead to a focusing of attention, services and funding on certain areas more than others. Moreover, the ways how human capabilities and orientations are today valued in knowledge-based economization disclose clear connections with neoliberal dogma. Knowledge-based economization is about governing living resources, and it gives and denies value to particular human conducts and human mentalities. It can thus be argued that "knowledge-based economization places a relatively narrow faction of population

in the driver's seat of societal development. In other words, knowledge-based economization is not only characterized by the financial and political success of its 'happy subjects' but also by its capacity to abandon certain populations and to situate them outside political normativity" (Moisio 2018a, 161). By following the tenor of Rhys Jones' (2019) insightful paper, one may thus legitimately ask whether the future work regarding the knowledge-intensive form of capitalism has the capacity to define a future that can both express hope and enable social and spatial justice.

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